

# **Alaska, Yukon, Cassiar Highways**

## **A Melancholy 1980 Ride**

**By BMW Motorcycle in 1980  
By Google Streetview in 2014**

***Derrick King***

A long, straight gravel road stretches into the distance, flanked by dense forest and mountains under a cloudy sky. The road is composed of light-colored gravel and dirt, with visible tire tracks. The forest on either side is dense with green and brown trees. In the background, mountains are visible under a heavy, grey sky.



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*Alaska, Yukon, Cassiar Highways*  
– *A Melancholy 1980 Ride*

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*Front Cover: Cassiar Highway, southbound, 1980*

*Back Cover: Alaska Highway, Watson Lake 1980*

*You don't take photos for yourself,  
you take them for the old man you will become  
—if you are lucky.*

# **Alaska, Yukon, Cassiar Highways A Melancholy 1980 Ride**

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## Alaska, Yukon, Cassiar Highways – A Melancholy 1980 Ride

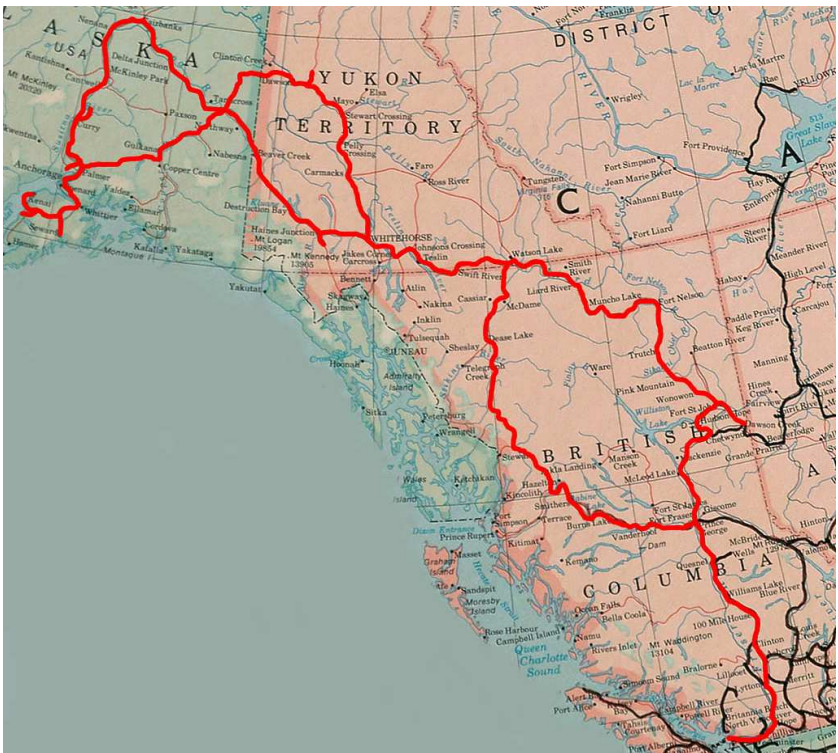
### Looking Forward from 1980

In September, 1980 I rode a muddy, moody loop up the half-gravel Alaska Highway, around Fairbanks, Seward and Dawson, and down the unpaved Stewart-Cassiar Highway. I captured it in Ektachrome with a Minox 35EL.

The ride covered about 5500 miles / 8900 km in 16 days. Roughly 1700 miles / 2800 km of this were unpaved. I covered about 360 miles / 580 km each riding day while bush camping most nights. Alone.

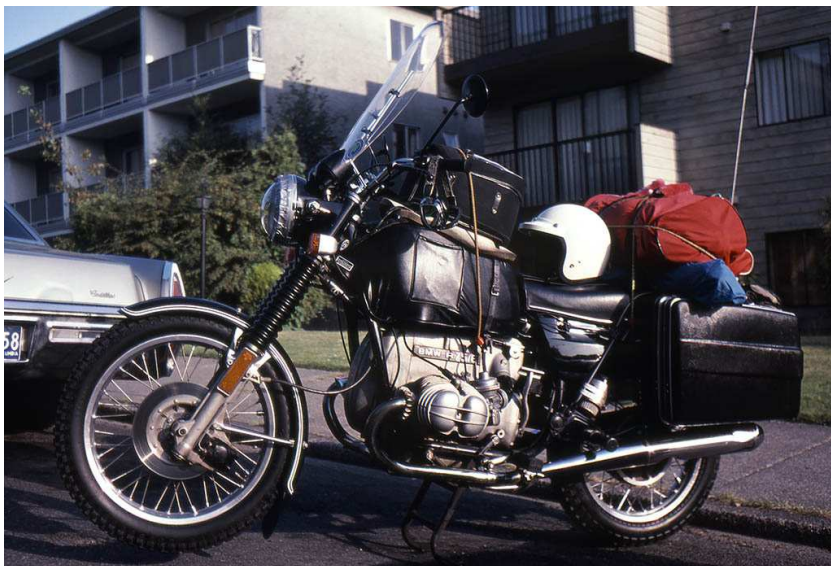
For this retrospective time capsule I looked up, where possible, what the same places look like today. I emailed places for photos and used Google Streetview to make side-by-side “whatever happened to” comparisons. While researching I felt like Rip van Winkle ... but Rip slept only 20 years.

### The Route



The black lines on this 1980 paper map are other rides on the same BMW.

## The Motorcycle



The motorcycle was a 1974 BMW R75/6. It was six years old and had taken me 55,000 miles / 90,000 km to all provinces and all lower 48 states. Alaska, logically, was the next challenge. I loved that machine but it was hit by a deer eight years later (at 100,010 miles / 160,000 km) and destroyed.

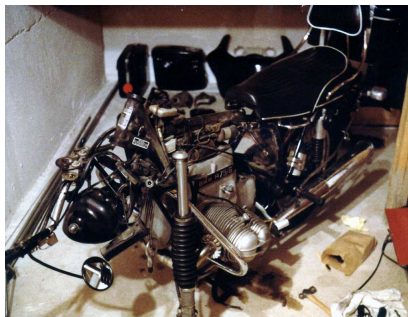
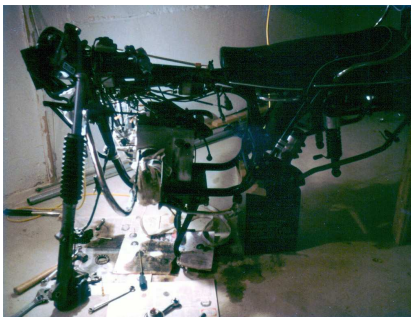
For this ride I installed off-road tires front and rear. I replaced the heavy Windjammer fairing with a lightweight plastic windshield. I taped a bubble shield over the headlight. I used a tank bag, but strapping a bag on the tank of a 1974 or older BMW created an annoying problem: turning hard left pressed the horn button and turning hard right pressed the starter, making me look like a fool in a parking lot. The bungee cord over the tank bag was an essential stabilizer otherwise the bag (made in England and held down by leather straps and buckles) would slowly keel over. The bungee cord was also a useful “third hand” to hold gloves when taking photos.

The knobby tires were wonderful on gravel, awful on pavement, and horrible on grated steel bridge decks, especially when wet. The range of the main tank was 200 miles / 300 km before reserve. The antenna was connected to a 23-channel CB radio in the tank bag. I thought if I became disabled I could use the radio to call for help but it probably would have been useless; I never heard anyone on the CB radio outside of towns.



## Alaska, Yukon, Cassiar Highways – A Melancholy 1980 Ride

From new, I did all the maintenance and repairs on that motorcycle. I did everything I could to ensure it would be reliable for remote travel. It had a few problems but it never broke down completely; it always got me home.



### The Equipment



## Alaska, Yukon, Cassiar Highways – A Melancholy 1980 Ride

### Riding Items

Belstaff Trialmaster riding suit	Local and foreign currency
Uvex goggles	Long john underwear
Minox 35EL camera, Ektachrome	BC, Yukon, and Alaska maps
Grantline heated electric vest	The Milepost guidebook
Bandana	Passport, credit cards, drivers license, registration, insurance
Vasque boots with rubber covers	Pen
Bungee cords	Plastic bags
Centerstand board (fiberglass)	Radio, battery
Chain, padlock, key	Foot powder
Chapstick	Army surplus rubber rain suit
Down jacket	Dopp kit
Earplugs	Snack bars
First aid kit, tensor bandage	Spare glasses
Fog-free for goggles	Spare keys
Lewis Leathers riding gloves	Swiss army knife
Handkerchiefs	Toilet paper
Helly Hansen pile sweater	Underwear, socks, T-shirts
Bell helmet	Wristwatch
Jeans	Water bottle
Kidney belt	Windbreaker
Laundry kit	Wool pants and shirt
Lighter	

### Camping Items

12V camping light	Optimus 8R gasoline stove
Binoculars	Paper towels, rags
Buck “Folding Hunter” knife	Rain poncho for camping
Coffee pot, Nescafé, sugar	Winchester 1200 shotgun, 3 SSG
Cups, plates, juice crystals	cartridges, 2 rifled slugs
Fill-up funnel for stove	Eddie Bauer down sleeping bag
Fishing rod, license	Soap for punctures and dishes
Folding water bag	Stew pot, brillo pad
Halazone for water purification	Stove windscreen, folding
Kel-lite flashlight	Sears Hillary Tent, fly, pegs
Knife/fork/spoons	Thermarest air mattress
Matches, firestarter	Towel
Muskol mosquito repellent	Tupperware

## Alaska, Yukon, Cassiar Highways – A Melancholy 1980 Ride

### Vehicle Items

Air filter	Transmission and shaft oil
Aluminum foil (also for making oil change funnels)	Head and valve cover gaskets
Bailing wire	Hose clamps
Air pump, tire patch kit	Ignition points, condenser
BMWMOA Anonymous book	Metric nuts, bolts
Can opener (also for oil cans)	Oil filter
Continuity and timing tester	Rope for laundry, camp, towing
Control cable pin	Silicone RTV glue
Crescent wrench, vise-grip pliers	Spare bulbs
Duct tape, electrical tape	Clutch, throttle, brake cables
Engine oil	Spare control lever
Flexstone for ignition points	Spark plugs, pre-gapped
Front and rear inner tubes	Tire pressure gauge
Fuel line and siphon	Wheel balancer and weights
Fuses	Wire hook for oil filter
	Zap nylon cable ties

Because of its lack of impact protection, nobody would take a road trip in a Belstaff Trialmaster riding suit today. But I used it (left); British two-piece waxed cotton outfit was expensive adventure riding gear at the time. Steve McQueen (“King of Cool”) and his buddies (right) liked waxed cotton too.



The sticky Belstaff suit sucked up road dirt and deposited black smudges on Leatherette stools and Formica counters up and down the highways.

## **Day 1: Vancouver, Fraser Canyon, Cariboo, Quesnel**

**400 miles / 644 km, paved**

The weather the first day set the mood for the entire trip: cloudy with showers and occasional sunny periods. Just look at those telephone poles:



## Alaska, Yukon, Cassiar Highways – A Melancholy 1980 Ride

Saddle Rock Tunnel in 1980, with the BMW:



And in 2014, on Google Streetview:



The only changes are additional lighting and a bike route sign.



## Alaska, Yukon, Cassiar Highways – A Melancholy 1980 Ride



Just the sky and the drizzle and me, bush camping for free:



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## Day 2: Summit Lake, Dawson Creek, Fort St John

480 miles / 772 km, paved



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## Alaska, Yukon, Cassiar Highways – A Melancholy 1980 Ride

The Mile Zero marker in Dawson Creek was just a highway sign in 1980:



The UGG grain elevator burned down ... on Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>, July 2007:



So the Mile Zero marker was moved a few hundred feet and looks like this in 2014, complete with coach parking lot and visitor center:



## Day 3: Bucking Horse River, Toad River

**353 miles / 570 km, of which 176 miles / 285 km unpaved**

The adventure began just north of Fort St John. This is what I came for. Now I could test those knobby tires:



Whoopee!



## Alaska, Yukon, Cassiar Highways – A Melancholy 1980 Ride



These horses and a few dogs were the only animals I saw the entire trip:



That is, except for a rabbit that ran across the gravel road in front of me and was chopped in half by the front tire, spraying guts onto the engine which then burned off with an acrid smell. There were no deer, moose, bear, no wild animals to be seen.

## Alaska, Yukon, Cassiar Highways – A Melancholy 1980 Ride

Rest break at Bucking Horse River:



No, that is not me in the photo. Note the fuel pump on the left and the daisy growing from the toilet recycled into a planter.

The Quonset huts in my photo were left by the US Army in the 1940s while building the highway, according to the new owner. By 2014 the business had moved to the other side of the street and hugely expanded:



Business has been good to them. The Quonset huts no longer exist.

## Alaska, Yukon, Cassiar Highways – A Melancholy 1980 Ride

A nicely sealcoated part of the Alaska Highway. About half of the Canadian part was paved like this, just narrow enough to want to pull over for safety whenever an oncoming vehicle approached.



Rest break:



## Alaska, Yukon, Cassiar Highways – A Melancholy 1980 Ride



I was disappointed to find so much litter in Alaska and the Yukon. I found old cans and bottles pretty much everywhere I stopped.



Alaska, Yukon, Cassiar Highways – A Melancholy 1980 Ride



Alaska, Yukon, Cassiar Highways – A Melancholy 1980 Ride





## Alaska, Yukon, Cassiar Highways – A Melancholy 1980 Ride

Camping in secluded silence down a side road off the main highway. Bliss.



Alaska, Yukon, Cassiar Highways – A Melancholy 1980 Ride

## Day 4: Watson Lake, Teslin

**363 miles / 585 km, of which 181 miles / 293 km unpaved**



# Alaska, Yukon, Cassiar Highways – A Melancholy 1980 Ride

There were a few thousand stolen signs in Watson Lake, all in just one row:



## Alaska, Yukon, Cassiar Highways – A Melancholy 1980 Ride

Today, there are 80,000 (mostly stolen) signs and TripAdvisor rates the Watson Lake signposts as number one of the two (count them, two!) attractions in Watson Lake. The Signposts have become a “Signpost Forest,” complete with a parking lot:



More variable weather:



## Alaska, Yukon, Cassiar Highways – A Melancholy 1980 Ride

The Nitsutlin Bay bridge coming in to Teslin is the longest bridge on the Alaska Highway:



The bridge still looks the same but the highway has been leveled and paved perfectly:



It is interesting to look at the size of the trees. In thirty years they do not seem to have grown more than a foot. Logging would not be a sustainable business so far north.

## Alaska, Yukon, Cassiar Highways – A Melancholy 1980 Ride

Teslin Lake Motors, at the other end of the Nitsutlin Bay bridge:



Today in Google Streetview:



The Chevron has closed. There is a Shell station and a hotel on the other side of the now-paved highway ... and two giant land yachts, unthinkable on the gravel road in 1980.

## Day 5: Whitehorse, Kluane National Park

**Whitehorse, Kluane National Park 221 miles / 356 km, of which 110 miles / 178 km unpaved**

Whitehorse Main Street in 1980:



And Main Street in 2014:



Pickups and Econolines before, Starbucks and sushi today.

## Alaska, Yukon, Cassiar Highways – A Melancholy 1980 Ride

The BMW is dwarfed by the SS Klondike II sternwheeler in 1980:



Whenever a truck came the other way I would pull over, slow to a crawl or stop, and duck behind the windshield. Even so, the flying rocks from the trucks sometimes hit me so hard through the cotton riding suit that they hurt and bruised me.





## Alaska, Yukon, Cassiar Highways – A Melancholy 1980 Ride



With knobby tires on the large wheels and the 8 inches of front and 5 inches of rear suspension that was standard on the 1970s BMWs, 80 mph / 130 km/h all day on dirt was easy, but I had to be alert: riding over frost heaves at high speed would bottom the suspension and launch me airborne.

## Alaska, Yukon, Cassiar Highways – A Melancholy 1980 Ride

Kluane National Park—Kathleen Lake:



Calcium chloride road spray:



## Day 6: Haines Junction, Pine Valley, Delta Junction, Fairbanks

**506 miles / 816 km, of which 107 miles / 172 km unpaved**

There were frequent delays because the road building season is short:



But these were opportunities to ride to the front of the traffic, to save passing it later in a cloud of dust and in the hail of flying stones.

## Alaska, Yukon, Cassiar Highways – A Melancholy 1980 Ride

The Haines Junction General Store, the Esso station, and a small motel in-between:



And the General Store in 2014 from an Internet photo. It seems the store moved a few blocks away, expanded hugely, and went out of business:



According to the Haines Junction town map, the Fish and Wildlife Office is where the General Store used to be and the Imperial Esso is now a FasGas.

## Alaska, Yukon, Cassiar Highways – A Melancholy 1980 Ride

The road junction in 1980:



And as it is in 2014:



The risk of missing the right turn to the main highway has been eliminated.



# Alaska, Yukon, Cassiar Highways – A Melancholy 1980 Ride

Pine Valley Chevron & Café, Yukon, 55 mi/ 90 km west of Beaver Creek:



## Alaska, Yukon, Cassiar Highways – A Melancholy 1980 Ride

And how it looks in 2014, closed and shuttered, on Google Earth:



The rustic original decorations are all gone—stolen, sold, or in safekeeping. In 1980 Pine Valley Café was said to be the best place to eat between Haines Junction and Beaver Creek, but paving under the 1976 Shakwak highway improvement started the decline and demise of most of the Alaska highway roadhouses. Asphalt—even broken and potholed asphalt—allows drivers to make better time than on gravel, eliminating the need for roadhouse stops.

## Alaska, Yukon, Cassiar Highways – A Melancholy 1980 Ride

13 miles / 21 km north of Tok on the Alaska Highway:



Delta Junction, the official end of the Alaska Highway:





## Alaska, Yukon, Cassiar Highways – A Melancholy 1980 Ride

Fairbanks, Cushman and 5th in 1980:



And the same spot in 2014:



The Men's Clothing store is still there—they must be doing something right.

## Alaska, Yukon, Cassiar Highways – A Melancholy 1980 Ride

Fairbanks Second Avenue in 1980 at night:



And in 2014 by day:



Neat and tidy, with a new development on the left.

Alaska, Yukon, Cassiar Highways – A Melancholy 1980 Ride

## Day 7: Mt McKinley (Denali), Talkeetna, Willow

295 miles / 475 km, paved



## Alaska, Yukon, Cassiar Highways – A Melancholy 1980 Ride

South of the Denali Park entrance:



And the same spot in 2014, now with paved shoulders and a guard rail:



## Alaska, Yukon, Cassiar Highways – A Melancholy 1980 Ride

### The Cantwell Chevron on George Parks Highway 4:



It is still operating in 2014, now expanded with a convenience store:



## Alaska, Yukon, Cassiar Highways – A Melancholy 1980 Ride

The Talkeetna Roadhouse near Denali in 1980:



... and the Talkeetna Roadhouse in 2014:



## Alaska, Yukon, Cassiar Highways – A Melancholy 1980 Ride

The exterior is similar, but look at the changes inside! The kitchen in 1980:



Above, I am sitting at the dining table in front of the cook; the place was that cozy. Note the woodstove. Now the place operates on industrial scale:



... and there is now a large parking lot for Princess Cruise coaches .



## Day 8: Anchorage, Cook Inlet (Turnagain Arm), Kenai, Cooper Landing

**365 miles / 589 km, paved**

It was always cold in the morning. The morning below was frosty, near 0 C / 32 F, but most mornings were around 5 C / 40 F and most mid-days were 10 to 15 C / 50 to 60 F. A thick Eddie Bauer goose down sleeping bag kept me warm at night and an electric vest kept me comfortable during the day.



However, cold also has benefits: there were no mosquitoes in September.





## Alaska, Yukon, Cassiar Highways – A Melancholy 1980 Ride

Cook Inlet:



A fishing license was expensive, but every time I cast a spinner, I caught a salmon! Hooking my dinner was no challenge at all.



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## Day 9: Seward, Matanuska Glacier, Glennallen

278 miles / 449 km, paved



## Alaska, Yukon, Cassiar Highways – A Melancholy 1980 Ride

Seward in 1980:



... and the same spot in 2014:



The New Seward Hotel, renamed the Hotel Seward (I suppose it isn't new anymore), has expanded.

## Alaska, Yukon, Cassiar Highways – A Melancholy 1980 Ride



Overlooking the Matanuska River around Mile 95 of the Glenn Highway:



Matanuska Glacier:



## Alaska, Yukon, Cassiar Highways – A Melancholy 1980 Ride

Mile 185 of the Glenn Highway:



Tilting telephone poles on the way to Wrangell-St. Elias National Park. The freezing and thawing shifts the soil.

In 2014, those melancholy but high-maintenance telephone poles are gone, replaced by microwave, optical fiber, and satellite:



## Alaska, Yukon, Cassiar Highways – A Melancholy 1980 Ride

My Optimus 8R Swedish campstove, next to a bird munching my granola:



As suggested by BMW dealer Philip Funnell, I simply fueled it with leaded gasoline from the motorcycle. Each night I popped the float bowl off a carburetor (no tool is required) and used three bowlfuls to fill the stove tank using a small funnel. We called this the “Fill-Up Funnel.” The stove is covered in lead and soot because of the technique used to start it. Here are my assistants starting up the stove in 1975 and in 2012. It still works today.



For camp water, I packed a folding plastic water bag. I filled it at the last gas station of the day, bungied it on the bike, and muled it around while prospecting for a campsite. For dinner I bought whatever I could—fresh or canned—at a store a few hours before camping; I cooked or heated this on the campstove. Breakfast was instant orange drink, Nescafé, and granola mixed with fresh or canned milk, or even water. Lunch was eaten at truck stops along the way—this was tastier than campground meals! The Harvest Crunch granola and the water bag are visible in the panniers on page 3.

## Day 10: Wrangell Mountains, Klondike Highway, Top of the World Highway, Yukon River, Dawson

**324 miles / 522 km, of which 121 miles / 195 km unpaved**

The view of the Wrangell Mountains from the Gulkana Airport on the Richardson Highway near Glennallen:



Note the blue-and-white 1953 Cessna 170, tag N4563C (see next page).

And the same spot in 2014—the same view, but with fewer airplanes:



## Alaska, Yukon, Cassiar Highways – A Melancholy 1980 Ride

Here is the same N4563C today, polished to perfection:



While researching this story I looked up the current owner in Anchorage, who sent me the photo above.





## Alaska, Yukon, Cassiar Highways – A Melancholy 1980 Ride



A nice spot to camp, and therefore covered in litter from previous campers:



## Alaska, Yukon, Cassiar Highways – A Melancholy 1980 Ride

Little Gold Creek Border Crossing on the Top of the World Highway:



In another week it would have closed for the season. It seemed so utterly remote at the time (see traffic statistics later), but the Google Streetview camera has even been here. I can go back in 2014 without leaving my chair:

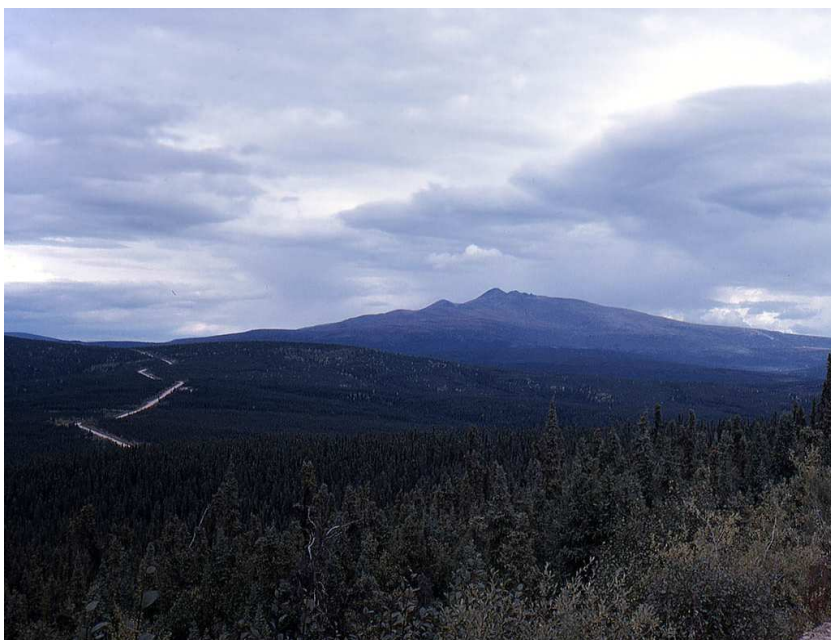


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The Top of the World Highway. Fantastic:



It is hard to capture the 360 degree view on film; you really do feel you are riding on the top of the world, especially since the traffic up here is even lighter than on the other Yukon highways. That's the highway down there on the left:



## Alaska, Yukon, Cassiar Highways – A Melancholy 1980 Ride

Waiting for the George Black Ferry to take me across the Yukon River:



The same ferry dock in 2014, with a paved and wider access road:



1980 ferry traffic. Note the beige VW microbus:





The natives on the ferry shared smoked salmon jerky with the pickup truck driver and me. It was unlike anything I'd tasted before. Delicious, salty, and very smoky.

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Dawson City in 1980:



I parked in front of the Gold City Motor Inn to check the room rate ... and when they told me, I instantly decided to camp! This time I camped in the fenced city campground as advised by the hotel staff where I would be secure against the bears. I was told bears wandered the town at night in search of garbage. The hotel staff said camping anywhere near *any* Yukon town was unsafe because of bears, although the countryside was safe.

## Alaska, Yukon, Cassiar Highways – A Melancholy 1980 Ride

Third Avenue in 1980:



... and in 2014 in Google Streetview:



Third Avenue is now paved, otherwise little has changed in a generation.

## Alaska, Yukon, Cassiar Highways – A Melancholy 1980 Ride

The Post Office on King Street in 1980 *vs.* 2014 on Streetview:



Time and traffic have passed Dawson City by.



# Alaska, Yukon, Cassiar Highways – A Melancholy 1980 Ride

Suburban Dawson City at dusk:



## Day 11: Dempster Highway Junction, Moose River Lodge, Whitehorse

**343 miles / 553 km, of which 343 miles / 553 km unpaved**

The Dempster Highway turns north here from the Klondike Highway:



There was nothing else at this corner in 1980. I rode a few miles north on the Dempster, which had officially opened just twelve months before but I did not have the time or the fuel range to ride to Inuvik. Dempster gravel was deep and loose, like riding on marbles. I reversed on the one-lane road, blaring the airhorn across the tundra as the left handlebar switch pressed into the tankbag. The junction in 2014, facing south from the Dempster:



The shadow of the Streetview camera looms in front of the new service plaza; Google Streetview has been all the way to Inuvik and Prudhoe Bay.

## Alaska, Yukon, Cassiar Highways – A Melancholy 1980 Ride

Buying fuel at Moose Creek Lodge from the slowest pump in town:

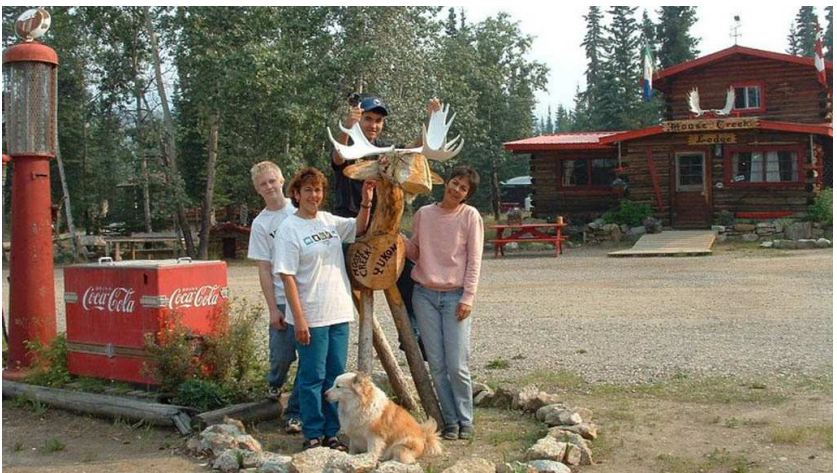


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I think that woman could have beaten me in an arm-wrestle. Look at the gasoline soaking into the ground; it would surely be illegal to fill and operate that gravity pump today.

And how Moose Creek Lodge looks in 2014, from their website:



The slowest pump in town has been retired.

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Alaska, Yukon, Cassiar Highways – A Melancholy 1980 Ride

## Day 12: Teslin, Watson Lake, Stewart-Cassiar Highway, Good Hope Lake

317 miles / 512 km, of which 317 miles / 512 km unpaved

Beautiful British Columbia:



## Alaska, Yukon, Cassiar Highways – A Melancholy 1980 Ride



Bailey bridges (army prefabricated truss bridges) were still common:



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I camped down a logging road about a mile from the main highway near Good Hope Lake and went fishing, catching nothing (as usual).



Look closely at the bike:



The headlight is missing! Two weeks of pounding over bad roads had bounced it out of the headlight bucket. The light was only held in by a spring clip tightened by a screw. The weight of the plastic bubble and the duct tape must have been too much for the clip. It was an expensive lesson; replacement of the chrome ring, glass, reflector, socket, parking lamp socket, wire clips, bucket clamp, H4 bulb, parking light, and rubber sealing ring cost hundreds of dollars. Fortunately there were no headlight-on laws.



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It was a lovely campsite. I fried beefsteak and canned vegetables away from the tent for bear safety, and had a twilight meal:



But the beef was tainted. I woke up nauseous and shaking with severe diarrhea. Having to get out of the sleeping bag and release emergency high volume defecations into the frosty darkness violently and repeatedly was not fun, although the stars and the sound of the river made it stoically, masochistally romantic. Inside the sleeping bag shivering in the tent between bouts I wondered if warm feces attracts bears. I was awake all night. By early morning the toilet paper ran out.

## Day 13: Dease Lake

### 86 miles / 139 km, unpaved

I decided it would not be wise to spend a day lying in a tent in the middle of nowhere under thickening clouds—not to mention without toilet paper—but I barely had the strength to break camp. I rode slowly to Dease Lake and spent 24 hours in the Grayling Inn, the only place in town:



The hotel manager was kind enough to make me some soup that evening and bring me extra toilet paper. I could not find the Grayling Inn on the Internet today. The Northway Motor Inn seems to have replaced it:



## Day 14: Meziadin Lake Junction, Kitwanga, Telkwa

**381 miles / 615 km, of which 300 miles / 485 km unpaved**

The Stewart-Cassiar Highway was the worst road of the trip, and I was still weak after nearly two days without a retained meal.



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The mud got deeper and deeper.



The bike got harder and harder to steer, and I finally figured out why. The front wheel wasn't turning!



So much mud had packed under the front fender that the tire was jammed. At that moment I learned why dirt bike front fenders are mounted so high! There was no way to park the bike and try to clear the fender because the

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ground was too soft for either the sidestand or the centerstand. All I could do was put my feet down and ride the bike like a snowmobile. Eventually I came to pavement in a construction site. Once the wheel hit pavement, it cleared and started turning again.



## Alaska, Yukon, Cassiar Highways – A Melancholy 1980 Ride

Here I could stop and dig the mud out of the fins so the engine could cool.



This is the only shot of me on the trip—covered in mud from top to toe:



Today the entire Stewart-Cassiar highway is sealcoated. And you can ride it from your easychair through the Google Streetview camera.

## Day 15, 16: Cache Creek, Vancouver

**492 miles / 794 km, paved to Cache Creek; 212 miles / 342 km, paved to Vancouver**

Entering Spences Bridge in 1980:



After the natural splendor of the last two weeks, the electronic sign made me want to turn around! Zoom in to a close-up:



On the left there are Pacific 66 and Texaco gas stations, a motel, and a restaurant. On the right there are Gulf and Shell gas stations and the Sportsman Motel and Restaurant. There were so many different brands of gas station in Spences Bridge in 1980 because if you wanted to buy from a brand for which you did not hold a house charge card—most petroleum companies did not accept credit cards—you had to pay cash. Therefore travellers preferred brands for which they had a card and every major town had at half a dozen brands of gas station along the road. My photos of gas stations are of Chevron stations because that was the only card I had.



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Here is the same spot in 2014:



The Spences Bridge highway services are all gone! The nearest gas station is now in Lytton, 16 miles / 26 km away. The frontage road on the right has become a ghost town:



The completion of the Coquihalla Highway bypass in 1987 cut the summer Fraser Canyon traffic in half and soon wiped out the Spences Bridge highway services.

I have been passing through Spences Bridge for longer than I can remember. The Baits Motel at 3717 Riverview (between the highway and

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the river, not visible from the road) opened in 1956. It was called the Quarter Circle J Motel until about 2000. Here is how the motel looked in 1958 where I am in shorts, climbing into dad's new Chevrolet Suburban:



From the Internet, a postcard of the motel when it was new in 1956:



And as the Baits Motel looks in Google Streetview in 2014—still operating and hardly changed after half a century:



## Looking Back from 2014

The trip wore out both tires and required two oil changes, not to mention a new headlight. I saw no animals, no mosquitoes, no aurora borealis—only rocks, dirt, trees, water, glaciers, salmon, and a few birds. The riding and camping were rough, dirty, solitary, introspective, and chilly. I didn't speak to anyone for two weeks except to buy what I needed. I didn't see another motorcycle on the trip outside of the towns. It was a moody, melancholy introvert paradise. There were only trucks, campers, vans, cars, and a few RVs on the road. The truckers often waved at me, and I waved back.

In 1980 the British scrambler makers had all closed and Harley nearly closed too; AMF sold it in 1981 after Harleys had all but vanished from the highways. BMWs and Moto Guzzis were uncommon, and the latter were heavy. Japanese bikes which were fast and reliable had been on the market for a decade but the tourers were top-heavy with stiff suspension and the enduro models were underpowered for the highway, especially when loaded with camping gear. In those days a few masochistic mechanics toured on remote dirt highways on motorcycles, but most of them preferred to go to Mexico and points south, where I went in 1981.

1980 marked a turning point: BMW introduced the R80G/S and began factory participation in the Paris-Dakar Rally. I didn't like the G/S because I wanted two full-size panniers and a full-size fuel tank. The market disagreed with me and the G/S became BMW's most popular bike, adventure touring off-the-shelf. 500,000 of them have been sold. Growing numbers of those bikes, and others like them, have gone up the Alaska highway and beyond.

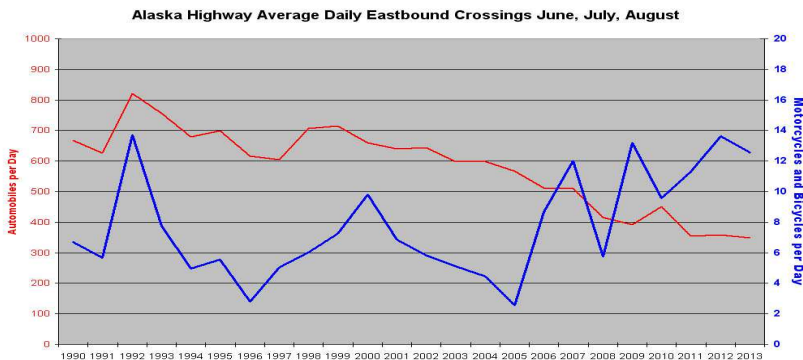
Most of these roads are now paved and you can ride them on any street bike. As near as I can estimate, if I retraced that route today and added rides to and from both Inuvik and Prudhoe Bay, from Dawson and Fairbanks respectively, the total trip would be about 1900 miles / 3000 km longer but would not cover any more gravel. The Dempster (736 km, all gravel) opened to the public in 1979 and the Dalton (800 km, of which 460 km gravel) fully opened to the public in 1994; in Streetview in 2014 they look like the unpaved parts of the Cassiar and Yukon highways used to look.

For this book I requested motorcycle traffic statistics from the Yukon Highways Dept, the Klondike Visitors Association, the George Black Ferry, and Statistics Canada. Statistics Canada had motorcycle traffic

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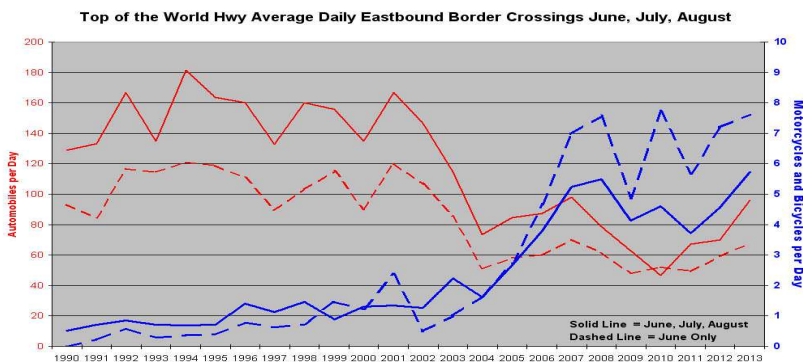
statistics, but only back to 1990. Here are the daily average eastbound border crossing statistics for cars (red) and bikes (blue) on the two major overland Yukon routes during June, July, and August from 1990 to 2013.

Alaska Highway automobile and motorcycle traffic:



Summer motorcycle traffic (blue line; right scale) at Beaver Creek Crossing *doubled* in the last twenty years (except for a strange blip in 1992) and keeps increasing. Meanwhile automobile traffic (red line; left scale) *halved* and keeps *decreasing*, perhaps because flying has been getting cheaper relative to driving. Relative to cars, summer bikes are three times as common in the last six years of the chart as they were in the first six years, from 100:1 (cars vs. bikes) to 35:1.

Meanwhile the traffic changes on the Top of the World Highway, the recreational route, are even more striking (solid is summer, dotted is June):



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Summer motorcycle traffic at Little Gold Creek Crossing multiplied *ten times* from less than one bike per day to about five per day. Meanwhile automobile traffic *halved* and never recovered. For the first six years of the chart motorcycle traffic averaged one bike to 220 cars in summer and only one bike to 350 cars in June, virtually non-existent. For the last six years; however, it averaged one bike to every 15 cars in summer and one bike to *eight* cars in June, an amazing difference—relative to cars, motorcycles (including bicycles) are thirteen times as common as they used to be in summer, and *forty* times as common in June. Now there are motorcycle tours, rentals, and rallies. There has been a “Dust-to-Dawson” June rally since 1992, with 297 bikes congregating in Dawson in 2012. This event has driven the June motorcycle traffic.

In September, from 1990 to 1992, only one oddball motorcycle (or bicycle) per *month* rode east over the Top of the World Highway—no wonder I didn’t see any bikes on my trip a decade before that.

For perspective I looked back a generation before 1980—to 1947. The Alaska Highway had just opened to the public but there was no road to Dawson Creek from Prince George. The road to Mile Zero from Vancouver was via Calgary and Edmonton, mostly on gravel.

The Fraser Canyon road was paved in the 1930s but in 1947 it was still barely wide enough for two cars to pass, with one-lane tunnels:



The pavement from Vancouver ended at Spences Bridge and the gravel road ended at Prince George. The Stewart-Cassiar and Top of the World highways did not exist.

In 1947 a rider’s challenge began in the Fraser Canyon; by 1980 his challenge had been pushed north of Fort St John; and in 2014 his (and nowadays her) challenge starts north of Fairbanks or Dawson City. This roadbuilding progress doesn’t even take into account developments in

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motorcycles, communication, and navigation (although it is hard to get lost where there is just one road). I wonder how far riders in 2046 will have to go to leave the asphalt, Ulu knives, and Google Streetview behind.

Trace the Alaska Highway south from Fairbanks on this 1947 map and you end up east of the Rockies as in the gold rush days, on an Indian perhaps:



A dusty biker drags a slab of asphalt into the saloon.

*“What’ll it be?” asks the bartender.  
“A beer for me ... and one for the road.”*

## Adventure Riders' Comments

I previously uploaded parts of my story to *Horizons Unlimited* and *Adventure Rider* website journals, receiving over 33,000 views. Here are excerpts from the posted replies:

A wonderful post, fascinating - thanks very much for taking the time to tell this story.  
*Michael*

Mate, that was an amazing post, thanks for that. I grew up in the interior of B.C. and there are many things in those pictures that take a person back to a specific time and place. Things like the narrowness of the roads, the look of the people, the building themselves. Reminds a person to take a lot of pictures of everyday life as even though it seems so commonplace, in a few years it will be interesting from a historical perspective. Heading to Alaska back in the day was an ordeal. Every summer there would be a road train of folks heading up with spare tires and gas cans piled on top of their vehicles. It was remote, the roads were bad and it was a long distance between points of assistance. Very cool trip to do on a bike. Thanks again.  
*Mountain Man*

Just incredible photos and descriptions. Thanks so much for taking the time to post that!  
*Danny Diego*

Fantastic to see how much has changed. My wife and I did most of that trip in 2013, much easier now. Some fantastic pictures, thanks for sharing!  
*Rondelli*

Wow! Thanks so much for sharing all this with us. This is my favorite post yet!  
*Nevil*

This is a very nice post. You must have spent some time on a scanner to make this happen. Well done.  
*Miles of Smiles*

Great. I loved this post. I had the pleasure of riding this last summer and your pictures are just what I needed. Many times on my ride I wondered what it might have looked like 30+ years back. Thanks for taking the time to post this.  
*509Rider*

Brilliant story and photographs, many thanks!  
*TM1-SS*

I'm standing, doing a golf clap. I could type paragraphs of praise but I'll simply say thank you, I enjoyed reading.  
*Buckeye Rich*

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Fantastic and interesting! Thanks for the work you put into it. Roads ... how things have changed. I don't think I could have handled it in 1980. *Old Sheila*

Thanks. I enjoyed your pictures and comments. The only bits of the Alcan south of Tok that are not surfaced today are areas being resurfaced. The Alcan you rode resembles the Dempster and Campbell River roads today. Thanks for this most excellent ride report. *SteverinoB*

Coollest ride report concept I've seen all year. 2014, too. Thanks for doing this. Reminds me of my airhead days. *SchizzMan*

This has to be one of the coolest ride reports I've read ... this one really appeals to my nerd side. *Mynamesrob*

Amazing stills. I now feel like digging out old pictures from the seventies/eighties ... Thanks for posting! *Conundrum29*

Perspective .... Thanks for taking us along on a seriously fantastic ride from back in the day. You are a true adventurer *Woody1069*

Thanks so much - The pictures were superb and brought back many memories. Thanks for this great piece. *Northstar Beemer*

Let me be the 999th person to say what a fine write-up that is. As I read through it I forgot I was sitting in front of a computer in 2014. *Tiny-wheel-200*

Good to see pictures of how it was back in 1980. I really liked the picture of the tunnel that hasn't changed but for the bike path sign. If you ever want that rugged ride feeling, try Top of the World Highway while they are freshly working on it in a downpour. Good work on the statistics too. *SilkMoneyLove*

Fantastic ride report ... what great riding to share, thanks a ton! *Sikorsky*

Thanks from another fan. It was a lot of work, but it was worth it. *Hardwaregrll*

I've read thousands of reports ... this is the best. Brilliantly written, researched and photographed. I swear, 'Just the sky and the drizzle and me' touched my soul. As a young guy, this makes me think I missed the 'good ol' days.' Cheers for taking the time to put this together. Flat-out brilliant. *BrianF*

I might do some rides a dozen times, but I seldom stop at locations I previously visited in my rush to see something new. I realize now I'm missing



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something. There are a lot of wonderful ride reports but yours is one of the best. Thank you for sharing the adventure.

*BeemerBO1*

Awesome ride report. You went to a lot of work to find the same spots you visited in 1980. I rode the Cassiar in 2005 when it still had a lot of gravel with board deck bridges and again in 2014 with no gravel and paved bridges. What a difference, and seeing your photos from 1980 it really was a challenging ride back then. Thanks for the work to share this with the rest of us.

*Ladybug0048*

Holy cow. I always thought of myself as a hot shot having done Vietnam, the Himalayas and Patagonia. I am starting to realize just how much of a novice I am compared to some of the road warriors around here. Time to put on some big boy pants. The author is a true Iron Arse.

*Crown Imperial*

What a great ride report. Thanks for all the hard work that went into making it happen!

*Horseiron1*

Thanks, great story, great report, really enjoyed the old photos. Brought back a lot of memories of the 80s for me, just the street scenes, and vehicles. Wow! Just wow.

*Zodiac*

Completely fascinating. Those pictures from 1980 are remarkable. Thanks for putting this up.

*Mike*

Wow! What a great ride report! I can't imagine how much work must have gone into putting this together, but it really is appreciated! Really a great read! Thank you!

*Presto88*

A+ Great ride report! Really like the before and after photos. Great photos, great writing, and great adventure!

*Pnoman*

Great ride report! Outstanding trip down memory lane. We sure have it easier these days!

*Bullspit*

What a terrific and unique ride report. Your photos and story will travel with me. Thanks for the time and effort.

*Backcountryboy*

You are a very talented and committed individual. Thanks for sharing and for being you. I hope someday we meet. But, if not, you have enriched my life anyway.

*Charlie*

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Man that must have brought back the memories. Sure brought them back for me. Thanks so much for posting. *Fast Idle*

That brings back memories. What a sojourn that must have been! Sure glad you took so many photos and saved them. With today's cameras we take it for granted that we will capture hundreds of shots. But when we had to do it with film it was a different story. Magnificent. Thanks for the effort. *Alcan Rider*

Great report! The Stewart-Cassiar highway was just a rumor when I lived up that way. The only way to get to Cassiar was south from the Alcan. *250senuf*

One of the best reports I have read. I have ridden to Alaska twice and each time it changes in subtle ways, as your photos attest. Thanks for taking the time to compile the photos and remember each story. *Stickman1432*

That was a totally awesome way to blow some time during a slow night shift! Thanks for taking the time to write it, scan the slides, and even find locations in Google Streetview! *Acidman1968*

Thank You. Just a splendid read ! I appreciate the time and effort in this report. You have set the bar quite high. *Kenbob*

Your pictures are unlike any I have seen in dozens of similar ride reports combing over the same areas. I really appreciate the work that went into your report. The simple joys of discovery in the wilderness on a standard motorcycle—true art. *Tedmarshall*

Incredible effort in compilation, not to mention the solo wilderness camping adventure alone. Thank you so much for sharing. I've shown this report to every rider I know. *Jwblanton*

Great ride report. Thanks again. Great bike to ride it on, just like my first BMW 35 years ago. *FotoTEX*

Awesome. I loved the old pictures and what it looks like today. Makes our ride in 2010 look like a cakewalk ... Great story, great job! *Long Donger*

VERY nice ride report Thank you for taking the massive amount of time to put this together. I wanna go to Alaska! *BigDogRaven*

I was a year old in 1980 but man this may be the coolest ride report I've come across. Stellar stuff, thanks for posting. *GTO3*

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Thank you so much! I enjoy seeing old pictures of my part of the world. It's fun to see how much things changed; things were so raw. Man, this report brought back some old memories. *Nanuq*

So cool to see your photos of how the highway used to be. I grew up in Alaska and while serving in the army I rode my bike from Texas to Alaska in September, 1980. My dad rode down from Alaska to Ft. Nelson on his Harley to meet me and ride back home. I was hoping maybe our bikes would have been parked in the background somewhere! Thanks for sharing! *Av8rPaul*

That's an awesome ride. It's really good of you to put this together. Those of us that spent years up north remember the slow transformation of the Alaska and Cassiar highways from mud to the pavement that we ride today. Those that travel today probably have no appreciation of what it was like in the 'good ole days'. Thanks for taking the time to show us. *YT Dave*

I showed my wife the pictures and told her with this year's trip north the roads are much better ... so no whining! *Phoenix101*

I enjoyed the uniqueness of this ride report. I especially liked the 'then and now' comparative photos. Well done. *CharlestonADV*

Thanks for the report. It is obvious you put a lot of work into it. I liked the before-and-after photos as well as your research. *Marka*

I like your report ... and your philosophical nature too. *Tassie*

A journey through space and time that was unique, lovely and touching—a true gift from the heart. Thank you! *OscarCharlie*

I have enjoyed your reports but particularly this one because I have been to most of the locations. Thanks for taking the time for this. It stands apart as ride reports go. *AlaskaSolstice*

Wonderful. The slides alone would have been remarkable. Quality. The effort to couple those images to current state makes the report exceptional. *Rango*

It was a pleasure to read. I rode some of the same routes in 1989 and there were still hundreds of miles of gravel. I met few motorcyclists and no mosquitoes. *Klay*

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Excellent! I had friends living in Coldfoot in the 1980s and when they came back to California I couldn't believe how trashed their car was. Dents, a huge crack across the windshield, tar caked all over the sides ... ugly. Busted windshields were routine thanks to the rocks the trucks kicked up. I can imagine how painful it was to be hit crouched behind your windshield beside the road. Ow!  
*Blader54*

Awesome. Your report was a trip up memory lane. I was born in Whitehorse in the 1970s, and grew up near the BC border. Your pictures were reminiscent of trips south to the Peace River country and back home again. Thanks so much for the report, very well written and researched.  
*Eyesprocket*

Thanks for sharing! You brought back some memories. I was born in Bella Coola, lived in Dease Lake, Cassiar, Faro, Dawson City, and Whitehorse. It's amazing how some things changed, and others haven't changed at all.  
*CallMeBoog*

Excellent! The now-and-then pictures were great; I drove Alaska in 1981, needless to say they brought back many memories. The time you rode up was a true adventure. The trusty BMW carried you through. When I get enough time off work, I'm heading to Alaska on my bike. Thank you for your ride!  
*McGee*

Beautifully done and very evocative. What a twinge I felt seeing the bungee over the tank bag (odd what catches our eye!) because I did the same thing to try to stabilize mine! I hated how waxed cotton gave me skin rashes at the wrists and neck and how it smeared anything it touched, but it was, as you said, all we had and I felt protected by it. My hat is off to you for surviving the cold, the mud, the loneliness and the endless roads.  
*Conchscooter*

What a gift to share with us! Great fun to hear your recollections and see your great photography.  
*Selkins*

You bring the awesome to my day. Fingers crossed that you have more of these gems in the vault.  
*Jfman*

Wonderful. Thanks for taking the time to do the 'then and now'. It is fun to see the places we were and to see your old pictures is even more fun.  
*OI Man*



US  
POSTS

WORKING ON  
ALASKA  
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STO  
RIVERTON, ILL.

NEW ILLI  
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HEAVENER

SACRAMENTO  
CITY LIMIT

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PENNSBURG  
PERMIT REQUIRED  
FOR PEDDLING  
OR SOLICITING

ALAMOSA  
CITY LIMIT

FRESNO CALIF  
2504

REDDING, CALIF.  
2020 MILES

STATELAND

DODGE CITY  
CITY LIMIT

RANKFORD  
SPRINGS

SILVER CITY  
CITY LIMIT

COOS BAY  
OREGON

HAM 1968

KATHAVIK

Oakdale  
CITY LIMIT  
POP 7078 ELEV 185

CHINO  
CITY LIMIT  
POP 10750 ELEV 720

SUDBURY

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OSMOND  
SYN LAKE  
MAN...

FORT  
MUDERDALE  
445 MI

TOWN OF  
ESTON  
SUSCATCHEWAN

YUMA  
ARIZONA  
2875  
MILES

ODEBOLT, IOWA  
300 Miles  
not having  
"Hot Tamales"  
"Hot Meats"

CURTIS LAKE  
1800 MI

LEWIS & CLARK  
BALLS PARK

THE  
NELSON

BOW BELLS  
OF HARTS, NDAK

PRINEVILLE-ORE

THORORA  
SABOTE

Lake Jackson  
3300 Miles  
to the South

MARCO